

A Change of Company

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Preacher: Rev. James Maciver

[0 : 00] Now let's turn back to Luke chapter 15 this evening and the verses that we read there but from verse 11 to verse 16.

We're going to leave the early part of the chapter, the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. Because, not that they're not interesting in themselves, but this parable of the prodigal son as it's usually called, expands in some ways on what you have in the other two parables.

Although there are some issues in the previous two that are not found, emphasized in the parable of the prodigal. They all have to do, of course, as you know, with something that is lost, a lost coin, a lost sheep and a lost son.

And how the lost are found or come back, in the case of the prodigal, to the place that he had left and gone into his lostness from.

There is an interesting emphasis in the first two that you don't find in the third one. And that is that in the case of the man who had lost the sheep and the woman who had lost the coin, it is they themselves who set in motion the process of recovering the sheep and the coin.

[1 : 26] In the parable of the prodigal, the emphasis is on that person who was lost, coming to have a change of mind and making his way back to his home, to his father.

In the previous two, the emphasis is more on the fact that the person who has lost what belonged to them, themselves took steps, they took the initiative, they set in motion the process by which the coin and the sheep came to be found.

And that is, of course, itself a very powerful and telling reminder to us that in our salvation, in our recovery by God, in coming to know of his salvation and recovering us from our lostness, it is God who takes the initiative.

It is he himself who comes in search of us. It is he who sets in motion the process of recovery, not we ourselves. And we have to bear that in mind even when we come to the parable of the prodigal son and the change of mind that there is when you go to elsewhere in the Bible.

When we come to that point, we'll see that it is basically to do with repentance, but that that is something which God himself is behind in the sense of the work of his spirit, the work of his truth.

[2 : 49] The initiative is always with God, the sovereign God, the loving God, the God of mercy, the God of grace. Now, the key to this parable of the prodigal son, and we could call it actually more accurately, the parable of the two sons.

Different ways of looking at the parable, obviously, but it's not really right to call it the parable of the prodigal son. I shouldn't say it's not right to call it that, but it's somewhat too limited because there are two sons in the parable, and the second son, the elder brother, is in his own right as important a feature of the parable as that of the younger son, although he's given more space and more is said about him.

And I suppose in a way, though, that the parable really is actually more about the father than it is about either son.

Because the key verse is verse 2. When the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear Jesus, the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, this man receives sinners and is eating with them.

That was their great complaint. These religious leaders, who were not in favor of what Jesus was saying or doing or claiming for himself, as we've seen going through the Gospel of Luke, their opposition is building up all the time as we read about Christ's life as he goes on towards Jerusalem and the cross.

[4 : 30] The opposition, the hatred indeed, of these Pharisees and scribes, these religious leaders, is increasing all the time. And when they come to see that Jesus is actually in the practice of receiving people that they despise, tax collectors, they're Roman collaborators, and sinners, they're just a roof raff.

They don't deserve to be in the kingdom of God. They have no place in this kingdom of God along with the likes of the Pharisees and the scribes. And these religious people.

And yet Jesus is receiving them. And Jesus is eating with them. And Jesus is holding fellowship with such people. That's the elder brother for you.

The problem with the Pharisees and the scribes was that they refused to come in. And that's what verse 28 is very clearly saying to us about the elder brother when his younger brother came back from his lostness in the far country.

And the father received him and made a meal for him, made a celebration meal for him. He received him in and he ate with him. The elder brother refused to go in.

[5 : 50] It was against his better judgment as he saw it. And that's really the key to the parable. The way that this murmuring, this grumbling against Jesus, and of course that has become one of the greatest statements in terms of setting out what Christ is really all about.

Remember the way we've gone through Luke has always been the case that we've come back to this point again and again because that's the point Luke is making. Who is this Jesus?

What is he about? And sometimes the very question is asked and then it's answered by a miracle or whatever as we've seen it. Well that's still the question of course.

Who is he? He's now on the journey to Jerusalem. He's going to be crucified there. You know when he told the disciples that this is going to happen to him in Jerusalem. And now he's the person who's receiving sinners and eating with them.

And that's one of the greatest verses in the Bible to set out the truth about who Jesus is, what his ministry was about, what he is still about.

[7 : 05] He receives sinners and he eats with them. He is pleased to receive them in welcoming them as portrayed in the figure of this father.

And he is pleased not just to receive them but to stay with them and to celebrate with them that they have returned to him. That's what he's about. That's what the key to the parable really is.

In other words, you have the religious lost and you've got the irreligious lost. You've got the religious self-righteous lost in the person of the elder brother.

He is as far from the father in his heart as the younger brother is geographically in the far country. The younger brother represents the person who's not religious.

He's openly away from God. But they're both lost. And they're both dear to the father. And they're both under his watchful eye.

[8 : 13] So let's look at these details that we find. We're going to have to divide the parable into three parts. There's a change, first of all, of company because the younger brother wants to leave home and leave the company of his father and his elder brother and the family home.

And then, God willing, next time we're going to come to the middle part where we find a change of mind. Verse 17. When he came to himself, he said, how many of my father's hired servants have come to have more than enough bread and I perish here with hunger.

That's a change of mind. He came to see things as they really were compared to how I'd been seeing things up to then. Then, thirdly, there's a change of state.

He came in a pathetic state and yet, very soon, as soon as he reached the father, he was embraced and the command was given.

Give him new clothes. Give him a ringless finger. Put shoes on his feet. He now belongs to the family. He's back home. A change of state.

[9 : 23] It's no longer the state of the far country, the lostness. He's now in the state of being part of this family again with his father. So, a change of company, a change of mind and a change of state.

But just before we look at the change of company, there's one other thing that we really need to mention. And it's in the two parables of the coin and the sheep as well as this one.

And that is the emphasis on joy. And we mustn't actually miss that. It's not just the joy that's in the prodigal's heart.

It's the joy in the heart of the one who has lost what belonged to them and came to find it again. And as Jesus himself puts it, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repents.

There is joy in heaven. There is joy, yes, there is joy in the very heart of God. However difficult we find it to describe that, to understand that, there is joy in the presence of God in the sense that in God himself there is a rejoicing, there is a delight, there is a joy in salvation, in sinners coming to be saved, in sinners coming back to him.

[10 : 43] In bestowing the privileges of sonship upon them that they had lost. Let's never lose sight of that note of joy because it's there in the prodigal as well.

It was, said the Father, fitting that we celebrate and be glad for this year brother was dead and is alive. He was lost and is found.

We don't have a God who is dure and stern as some people portray Calvinistic theology.

We don't have a God who has nothing in him of celebration, of joy, of rejoicing, of delight. We don't have a God who is just filled with gloom and with judgment and with darkness.

We have a God who has revealed himself in the person of his son, Jesus Christ. And in revealing himself in Jesus Christ, as elsewhere up to that moment, he revealed himself and reveals himself still as a God who rejoices in saving sinners.

[11 : 58] Will there be rejoicing with God over someone here even this evening? That is the kind of God we worship.

This God who takes delight in our salvation. Well, there are two things in these verses that change of company.

First of all, there is a freedom which imprisons. And I'll try and explain that in terms of how we find here in the younger son his longing to leave his father's home under the impression of course that there was much greater freedom out there than there was to stay where he was in the home.

And we're going to look at that in terms of our own present day idea that freedom really, proper human freedom, the enjoyment of freedom is away from God.

And that the more you get away from God and the more you put God out of your mind and out of people's thinking and out of people's practices the more you come into your humanness and express your humanness the way it should be expressed and develop your humanness the way it should be developed without God.

[13 : 20] That's the first thing. It's a freedom but it's a freedom which imprisons. because actually it turns out not to be freedom at all. There is no freedom away from God.

Secondly, there is a lifestyle which impoverishes or makes us poor or weak. Because the lifestyle that he entered into after he left home not only did he find that it was really a prison in which he was bound and in terrible conditions but it was a lifestyle that he adopted that impoverished him and actually took him to the point and verse 16 puts it very graphically no one gave him anything.

He was at the mercy of the land that he wanted to go to of the people away from his father's house and he had left that plenty and now he had nothing.

Nobody gave him anything and that is such a powerful expression of how following our sinful lifestyle following away from God the path that leads us away from him it will ultimately come to our losing everything and no one will give us anything worthwhile.

So that's the outline of our study this evening. A freedom which imprisons now you look at verse 11 there this young man he said to his father father give me the share of property that is coming to me and he divided his property between them then he took it all and took his journey into a far country he longed to leave home he wanted a change of environment a change of company he wanted to go his own way and of course that really takes us back if we just go sideways a wee minute before we look at it in terms of what it teaches ourselves in our everyday existence it does take us back to the fall of man in the garden of Eden when we first sinned against God in our parents Adam and Eve of course the kind of teaching that wants to take the Bible out of our lives wants to take things out of the Bible as well and one of the things that people are desperate of that mindset that doesn't have any time for God is well if you're going to keep your

[15 : 48] Bible whatever you do don't believe the likes of Genesis chapter 3 which tells us supposedly they say about how we've come to be the kind of people we are with the kind of warped minds and bad habits and all the rest of it the Bible calls it sin how did we come to be sinners we fell deliberately and willfully we gave heed to another voice than God's and we accepted an alternative to the voice of God you know when mankind Adam and Eve as representing mankind when they were driven out of the garden of Eden by God it was a just judgment of God but they had forsaken God before then some people might say well if that's really true how could God put them out of this garden of Eden that he had actually created for them they had left

God long before they left Eden they had left God they had deliberately turned from God's counsel and God's voice and God's word to the word of the serpent representing Satan there's our fall there's our sinfulness in its origin there is how we came to be the people we are we left where we began and in leaving where we began we left security and safety and freedom and we came into the prison house of sin and our lostness but come back to the prodigal that's the origin of things but from that we ourselves in our way of life as we are in ourselves are a people who follow our own inclinations this is a picture of you and of me this is a picture of our minds as we're left to ourselves we don't come to

God we don't approach God we don't have a love to draw near to God it's in the opposite direction we don't like the law of God we don't like to be ruled by another person we don't like to be ruled by God we think that's far too restrictive that's far too narrow and you can see that one of the elements in that is selfishness there's also ungratefulness the selfishness of this young man this property would have been his or a share of it would have been his a third of it would have been his and two thirds for the older brother that was the practice would have been his if he had been patient would have been his when his father died would have passed on to him in his will couldn't wait for that he's too impatient too selfish wants it now wants to do with it what he thinks best to do with it he wants to take everything that will belong to him one day he wants that now he can't wait for the moment he wants to leave his father there and not wait until his father dies somebody else can look after his father he doesn't matter he wants to follow his own way you see that's a portrait of your heart and of my heart as it really is in itself it's emphasizing here for us that this is what we're like our rights our choices our ways our life our future that's what we're like and that's what our world is like because that's what our heart is like selfish not given to put

God first that's what Jesus taught us about discipleship in the previous passages that it's putting him first it's reversing what we are in ourselves naturally and there's the ungratefulness of it as well there's absolutely nothing there as he closes the door behind him and takes these possessions this property that his father had given you don't find the word thanks anywhere it's ungratefulness think of all that his father has done for him think of what it's like for ourselves when our children perhaps at times as we are all prone to don't show gratitude for what's been done for them and fail to actually give thanks for something or other that we've given to them maybe even had sacrificed things ourselves to give to them what would we feel like if our children turned down and just slammed the door in our face and without even a thanks or a buy your leave made their way away from us well that's what this young man did that's what we are with

God I have to look into my heart tonight and you have to look into yours and you have to ask this question how grateful am I to God for all that he's given me how thankful am I to God for the many benefits that he's given to me over and above many other people in the world that I know of Abraham Lincoln one of the great presidents of the United States in 1863 in a speech he reminded the nation he reminded the people of this very point he said we have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven we have been preserved these many years in peace and prosperity we have grown in numbers in wealth and in power as no other nation has ever grown but we have forgotten

[22 : 13] God we have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us and we have vainly imagined in the deceitfulness of our own hearts that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own intoxicated with unbroken success we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace too proud to pray to the God who made us 1863 2013 very appropriate words for our day for our society for ourselves we have become too proud to pray to the God who made us all the things we receive that are good are gifts the Bible says from heaven from the father of lights here is a young man who powerfully in the story in the parable that Jesus is powerfully setting out for us who reminds us powerfully of how natural it is for us to be ungrateful to be unthankful and to be selfish but here he is and he wants to be free and so his father divides the property and off he goes not many days later the youngest son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country and there he squandered his property with reckless living is he free is he better off than he was in the home he longed to be away from obviously not but let's ask the question what is freedom then how are we going to define freedom it's a big word in human usage down through the centuries it's a big word today there are many people in the world tonight that don't have freedom freedom in the sense to worship together like we are freedom in the sense of being free to speak what they think is appropriate in their own country because otherwise they'll be put in prison free to speak against oppressive regimes or government they're not free they would love to be as free as you and

I am but what is freedom in the widest sense how are you going to define freedom well let's take the secularist humanist view of it let's take that because it's currently one of the big issues in our own country the secularist humanist view of freedom and this is so important to ourselves you may think you're getting a bit fed up hearing this but it's very much to do with the conditions of our day that you and I have to be aware of as a great threat as a great threat indeed to our freedom and to our freedom in the gospel especially secularist humanist freedom is take God out of everything do away with this nonsense that God in the Christian teaching of these centuries old teaching do away with this get it out of our schools get it out of people's lives get it out of people's heads let people really be free let them be free in the sense of being free without God let them be free to follow what they think is best the teachings of the human mind itself untrammelled by all of these centuries of religious thought and theology and practice that the church has imposed upon people and that Calvinism especially has imposed upon people where Calvinism is still strong get into the far country away from this restrictive home where religion rules that's secularist humanist thinking that's why there's such a great push to remove Christian worship from our schools throughout our nation why there's such a big push to take the Bible out of school assemblies and any reference to God out of school assemblies it's done in some places already in our country but if the Bible is right as we know it is that freedom that leaves the safety of God's word and God in the home that he provides for us in Jesus Christ in salvation and all of these things if we leave that and head to the far country however bright it may seem in the eyes of the secularists the Bible tells you that is going to imprison yourself because what people call freedom

God sees as a dreadful prison why so? because that definition of freedom fails to take account of morality and spirituality in the biblical sense we saw this already there's quite a lot of connections actually between our study this morning of King Ahaz the man about whom nothing good is said in 2nd Chronicles 28 and this particular passage that we're looking at this evening because there was Ahaz looking in all the wrong places for help he didn't look to God who is the only source of true help for us and therefore his life was a waste and that's what you find in this definition of freedom as well in the secularist thinking of our day freedom must actually take account of biblical morality that's to say the standards of God for human life and the law of God for human life and the gospel of God for human life because it is there that you find described our condition as sinners remember this is what the parable is saying this is what the parable is really setting out to answer the complaint of the Pharisee this man receives sinners and the secularist says we're not sinners that's meaningless do away with the kind of teaching that teaches our children that they are sinners and nice prim and proper people brought up in the church and thinking they've always been Christians will follow and say that's true we're not sinners we've never been sinners we've never killed anybody we've never lain in the gutter drunk we're not sinners and God is saying did I send my son into the world to save the righteous is this

Jesus on the way to the cross as we're looking at him in these passages and following him on this journey is he going to that cross for people who think they're good enough without him no he's going to the cross for people who are absolutely undeserving of anything he did for them who are sinners in the sense of themselves naturally in their hearts being inclined against God and have a hatred for the law of God to rule their lives and freedom is not in the direction of going further away from God freedom is accepting the terms of God Christ's terms of discipleship somebody put it this way freedom is not the freedom to do what you like but the freedom to do what you ought to do and when you have the freedom to do what you ought to do what God expects you and commands you to do that is real freedom and the freedom of the secularist is a dreadful prison because in it you're chained to what God calls sin and you're chained to what God calls unrighteousness and you're chained to what God calls lostness and you're chained to what God calls a lost eternity is that freedom no says

Jesus this is freedom and as John put it if the son makes you free that's Jesus that's God himself in the person of Jesus Christ and again speaking to the Jews in John's gospel who opposed him who did not accept his teaching who were not for him to rule over them if the son shall make you free said Christ you are free indeed you have the true freedom that human beings can enjoy I was talking the other day about Voyager spacecraft it's mind boggling the miles that that spacecraft has travelled since it was launched in 1977 it's gone all the way up through space to places like Saturn and passed through the rings of Saturn or near the rings of Saturn and it's then been launched after all these planets going away from Earth and going away from the Sun and it's now we're told actually entered into interstellar space space between the stars and the galaxy it's travelled 12 billion miles since 1977 it's exploring already these vast regions and

[32 : 54] I like to compare the freedom that is in Christ with that little spacecraft that's left this world of ours on Earth in 1977 and has been exploring the vastness of space ever since and it's just going to go on and on and on for who knows how long and you compare that with a child playing with a model of it in his living room that child with the model is the freedom of the secularist that's as far as he can go within his own mind within his own idea of what's right and wrong within his own understanding there is the Christian he has the whole galaxy and more of God's salvation to explore and it'll never end that's being free that's the freedom that this person of Jesus brings us into that's what it means to come back to your father that's what it means to turn your back on the lost country or the far country where lostness is the characteristic of all who live there that's what it's like to come back and know peace with God that is freedom you know once

Paul once actually the apostle Paul remember when he was writing to the Ephesians the apostle himself thought that he was actually very free at one time that he followed the laws of God so strictly and actually was in terms of righteousness he was free from condemnation all of that stuff but then when he came to meet with Jesus on the road to Damascus everything changed he realised that what he had thought about being free in terms of acceptance with God was a dreadful prison that he had all this time actually been in chains to his own righteousness and to sin and to God's condemnation and was Christ to set him free and when he wrote to the Ephesians this is what he said you who were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked following the course of this world following the prince of the power of the air that's the one we listened to in

Eden the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh carrying out the desires of the body and of the mind and whereby nature the children of wrath like the rest of mankind that's the freedom of secular that's the prison of self righteousness that's being chained to sin you he said who were such God being rich and mercy even when we were dead in our trespasses made us alive together with Christ by grace you have been saved and raised up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus how free is that seated with

Christ in the heavenly places in other words as acceptable to God as his own very son Jesus Christ is there is no condemnation there there is no sin marked against you there is no lost eternity waiting for you the son has made you free that is freedom that is what we want to try and impress on the people of our day that this terrible concept of freedom that is so much in the thinking about people is actually a huge lie it's the voice of the serpent who promised Adam and Eve all the freedom they would want if they were free from God and they fell into the gloom of sin well that's a freedom which imprisons we spent a bit of time on that more so than I thought in fact but nevertheless it's such an important issue for us to understand these matters in our own current situation and in the kind of influential thinking of so many around us but then there's a lifestyle which impoverishes as well just very briefly from verses 13 through to 16 there when he had squandered his property in reckless living when he had spent everything a severe famine arose in that country well there's first of all a thoughtless wasting he's not thinking straight it's only when he comes to himself that he really sees things for what they really are up to then he's living in a different world a world that's not really true to his situation at all he's not really seeing the truth of things in our worlds and that too is an effect of our fall our mind has become damaged to the extent that we are not aware until

God brings us to see it of the exact situation we are in and that's what you recall from chapter 8 remember there we saw the man that Jesus came across a legion who was possessed of the devils that were sent into the swine by the Lord and the great verse there that really describes for us the freedom again and the salvation the way that God and that Christ sets the mind itself back to what it should be where he says there that the people in that country they were so afraid when all of this took place and they came and saw him this man who had been possessed by the devils and they found this man sitting at the feet of Jesus clothed and in his right mind and that's what happened to this prodigal when he came to his right mind when he began to think about things properly which tells us we don't have the right mind until God shows us the truth and until the truth comes to convince us of what we really are and where we really are somebody said this in terms of our minds which really is the control room in many ways of our lives let the mind of the master be the master of your mind that's the Lord

[40 : 24] Jesus Christ that's what the parable is really going on to tell us how this mind of this young man changed when he came to himself and that's what happens in our repentance in our turning back to God in our coming back to God and receiving his welcome the mind of our master comes to be the master of our mind it's no longer our own self our selfishness our ungratefulness and then they're reaching this low point when he had spent everything he wasn't forward looking that's what we've seen a thoughtless wastage isn't that how it is with so many of ourselves we don't think of eternity so many people go through this life not thinking ahead just like this man he wasn't thinking ahead to the possibility of a famine or anything like that he wasn't thinking in any way of these things in the future neither are we if we're not in our right mind we don't think of eternity at least not very seriously but we have to and then when he had spent everything this famine came to the country and of course that placed him in a critical situation he had nothing left and you might think well somebody in that situation surely the first thing he would do or think of doing was to go back home and to plead with his father or to say to him

I was wrong will you have me back I can't get on there anymore because I've run out of all the property you gave me I need you to have mercy upon me but he didn't he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country you see he's going further away from his home all the time and you can just see the Pharisees faces as Jesus mentions pigs that is the lowest employment in the mind of these serious Pharisaic Jews to work with pigs to have anything to do with that unclean animal is the low point of human life that's what this young man had reached but don't imagine for one moment that that just means those who have come to such a crisis in their lives as they're now alcoholics or drug addicts people who have these sort of conditions day by day that they've got themselves into that's what this means isn't it well it includes it but it's by no means excluding ourselves because without

God that's what actually the state of our hearts is like also tonight do you have a longing to be fed do you have a longing for your soul to be nourished doesn't matter what you have materially or financially leave that aside just now that's not the important issue the important issue is your spiritual side your soul that dimension of your life do you have a longing for that true freedom and satisfaction well you know where you're going to find it you're going to find it not in the far country of ruling your own life you're going to find it in going back to

God and you won't find it till you do so because as long as you're in the far country away from God your life is a wastage you're like this young man no one gives him anything there's nothing there for him that will satisfy the needs of his life that's how it is for you and for me too this man this Jesus receives sinners and eats with them who's that that's you and that's me and if tonight you or I are looking at the husks of this world be done with that go back to your father you know that there's plenty there for you you know there's a welcome waiting for you if you've not gone back till now and you know that when he sees you coming he will rejoice at the sight of your return lord help us we pray to take heed of all that your word teaches us about condition of the provision that you have made for us of the way in which you have such a welcome waiting for returning sinners grant that we may be amongst them and that as we are amongst them that we also may take delight in that which gives delight to our god in the salvation that is in your son hear us we pray for his name's sake amen